

could only help my chances of working at an intelligence agency, which was where my talents would be most in demand and, perhaps, most challenged.

Thus I became reconciled to what in retrospect was inevitable: the need for a security clearance. There are, generally speaking, three levels of security clearance: from low to high, confidential, secret, and top secret. The last of these can be further extended with a Sensitive Compartmented Information qualifier, creating the coveted TS/SCI access required by positions with the top-tier agencies—CIA and NSA. The TS/SCI was by far the hardest access to get, but also opened the most doors, and so I went back to Anne Arundel Community College while I searched for jobs that would sponsor my application for the grueling Single Scope Background Investigation the clearance required. As the approval process for a TS/SCI can take a year or more, I heartily recommend it to anyone recovering from an injury. All it involves is filling out some paperwork, then sitting around with your feet up and trying not to commit too many crimes while the federal government renders its verdict. The rest, after all, is out of your hands.

On paper, I was a perfect candidate. I was a kid from a service family, nearly every adult member of which had some level of clearance; I'd tried to enlist and fight for my country until an unfortunate accident had laid me low. I had no criminal record, no drug habit. My only financial debt was the student loan for my Microsoft certification, and I hadn't yet missed a payment.

None of this stopped me, of course, from being nervous.

I drove to and from classes at AACC as the National Background Investigations Bureau rummaged through nearly every aspect of my life and interviewed almost everyone I knew: my parents, my extended family, my classmates and friends. They went through my spotty school transcripts and, I'm sure, spoke to a few of my teachers. I got the impression that they even spoke to Mae and Norm, and to a guy I'd worked with one summer at a snow cone stand at Six Flags America. The goal of all this background checking was not only to find out what I'd done wrong, but also to find out how I might be compromised or blackmailed. The most important thing to the IC is not that you're 100 percent perfectly clean, because if that were the case they wouldn't hire anybody. Instead, it's that you're robotically honest—that there's no dirty secret out there that you're hiding that could be used against you, and thus against the agency, by an enemy power.

This, of course, set me thinking—sitting stuck in traffic as all the moments of my life that I regretted went spinning around in a loop inside my head. Nothing I

could come up with would have raised even an iota of eyebrow from investigators who are used to finding out that the middle-aged analyst at a think tank likes to wear diapers and get spanked by grandmothers in leather. Still, there was a paranoia that the process created, because you don't have to be a closet fetishist to have done things that embarrass you and to fear that strangers might misunderstand you if those things were exposed. I mean, I grew up on the Internet, for Christ's sake. If you haven't entered something shameful or gross into that search box, then you haven't been online very long—though I wasn't worried about the pornography. Everybody looks at porn, and for those of you who are shaking your heads, don't worry: your secret is safe with me. My worries were more personal, or felt more personal: the endless conveyor belt of stupid jingoistic things I'd said, and the even stupider misanthropic opinions I'd abandoned, in the process of growing up online. Specifically, I was worried about my chat logs and forum posts, all the supremely moronic commentary that I'd sprayed across a score of gaming and hacker sites. Writing pseudonymously had meant writing freely, but often thoughtlessly. And since a major aspect of early Internet culture was competing with others to say the most inflammatory thing, I'd never hesitate to advocate, say, bombing a country that taxed video games, or corralling people who didn't like anime into reeducation camps. Nobody on those sites took any of it seriously, least of all myself.

When I went back and reread the posts, I cringed. Half the things I'd said I hadn't even meant at the time—I'd just wanted attention—but I didn't fancy my odds of explaining that to a gray-haired man in horn-rimmed glasses peering over a giant folder labeled PERMANENT RECORD. The other half, the things I think I had meant at the time, were even worse, because I wasn't that kid anymore. I'd grown up. It wasn't simply that I didn't recognize the voice as my own—it was that I now actively opposed its overheated, hormonal opinions. I found that I wanted to argue with a ghost. I wanted to fight with that dumb, puerile, and casually cruel self of mine who no longer existed. I couldn't stand the idea of being haunted by him forever, but I didn't know the best way to express my remorse and put some distance between him and me, or whether I should even try to do that. It was heinous to be so inextricably, technologically bound to a past that I fully regretted but barely remembered.

This might be the most familiar problem of my generation, the first to grow up online. We were able to discover and explore our identities almost totally unsupervised, with hardly a thought spared for the fact that our rash remarks and profane banter were being preserved for perpetuity, and that one day we might